

Artifacts in Architectural Study Collections as Seen from Different Points of View

A Craftsman

While most of us assume that architectural study collections contain only old objects from historic buildings, there is a good case to be made for including new objects such as patterns, molds, etc., that were used in the restoration of a historic building so that they can be available for future repair and replication.

The Old Merchant's House Ceiling Medallions

David Flaharty

The Old Merchant's House, c.1832, at 29 East Fourth Street in New York City, has been described as "transitional" to the extent that its unrestrained federal woodwork coexists handsomely with its robust Greek revival plaster ornamentation. Indeed, the matching ceiling medallions in the double parlors (see figure 1) are unquestionably the finest designs to survive into the late-20th century and are superior to any composed during the American classical revival.

Builder-architects of typical lower Manhattan row houses generally specified flat plaster ceiling fields as three-coat work against sawn wooden lath and, with the client's approval, bought enrichments from the corner plaster shop

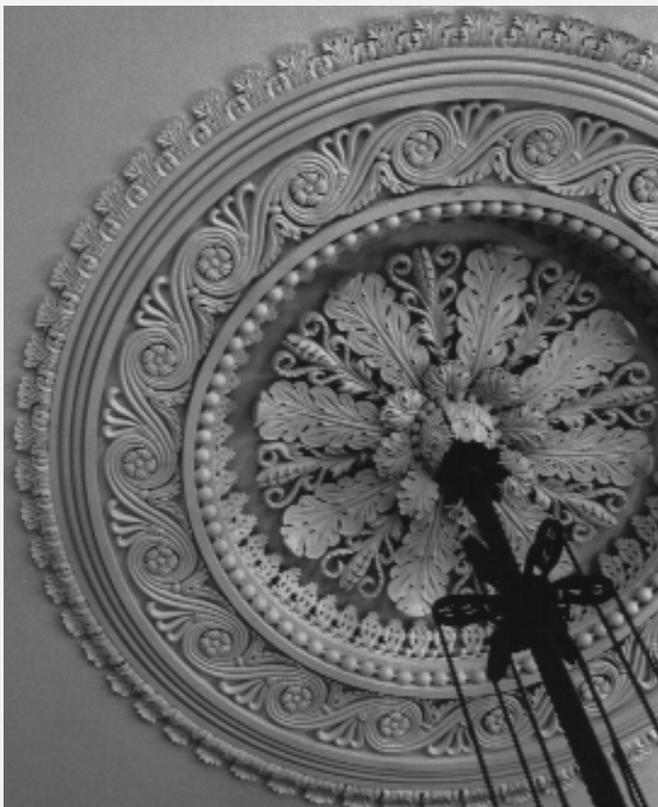


Fig. 1. Ceiling medallion repaired and reinstalled in the Old Merchant's House, New York, NY. Photo by the author.



Fig. 2. These cast ornaments from a ceiling medallion in the Old Merchant's House, New York, NY, were removed to replicate missing originals. Historic plaster enrichments and the rubber molds that create them are a part of Mr. Flaharty's personal architectural study collection. Photo by the author.

often following period stylebooks such as Minard Lafever's *The Beauties of Modern Architecture* of 1835.

The Merchant's House medallions, however, appear with recessed alternating acanthus foliate center clusters. To achieve this dramatic result, framing and lathing of the central ceiling joists was necessarily more elaborate than simply running joists level from party wall to party wall into masonry pockets.

With the flat plastering complete, the artisans turned plain-run, reeded surround mouldings on the ceilings by troweling a mixture of gypsum and lime ahead of revolving sheet metal template blade sections nailed to stocks and slippers. Off-site cast plaster enrichments, such as the illustrated center cluster, guilloche/rosette and surround acanthus foliage (see figure 2), were then set within and around the runs using plaster as an adhesive.

Like all early houses in New York City, the Merchant's House has been subjected to masonry settling, nearby blasting, water intrusion and heavy vehicular traffic—all factors which cause plaster ceilings to fail, particularly on center with oversized ornamentation. But the unusually substantial framing allowed these medallions to withstand the forces of gravity regardless of the increased weight.

Running and Enriching a Ceiling Medallion. The method of running and enriching a ceiling medallion remains the same today.

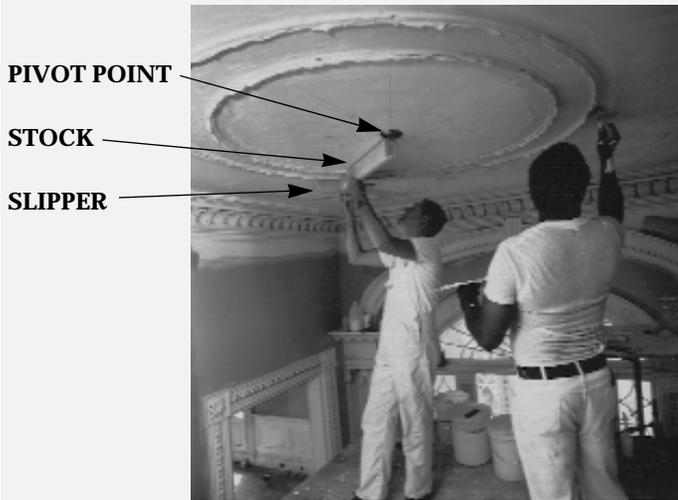


Fig. A. First, a plain-run surround is spun from a pivot point centered in the ceiling field. Photo by Peter Sanders.



Fig. B. Ornament layout is determined using plane geometric principles; segmented locations are deeply scratched to provide a rough surface for adequate bonding using plaster as an adhesive. Photo by Peter Sanders.

Students of Greek revival plaster medallions who could see the plaster models in the author's personal study collection or the restored medallion on-site, would understand why it is appropriate to say that the medallion form has never been designed and executed more brilliantly than in the double parlors of the Merchant's House. Peering through windows of Greenwich Village townhouses, one observes centerpieces composed with varying degrees of success. But at the Old Merchant's House, there can be no question that this unidentified craftsman was the reigning genius of American classical revival plasterwork.

For a more detailed description of running and enriching a ceiling medallion, please refer to Preservation Briefs 23.

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An Architectural Historian

Through the existence of architectural elements in architectural study collections it is possible to develop drawings to explain the methods of construction and to highlight individual features. Architectural study collections can also be sources for replicating or reproducing lost or severely deteriorated features or elements. Many manufacturers will study the historic original and develop a new product or a reproduction product for use in other buildings. This viewpoint contrasts two drawings of windows—one from an early historic window, and one from a now historic window.

Residential Casement Windows

Kathleen Catalano Milley

The wood casement sash depicted in the detailed drawing in figure 1 dates from c. 1641, and comes from the Newport, RI, home of Governor William Coddington. Now in the study collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, the sash was the only feature salvaged when the Coddington house was demolished in 1835. Its survival, complete with glazing, affords a rare opportunity to examine the construction and design of a mid-17th-century architectural artifact.

The sash echoes the windows seen in the European towns and villages from which the colonists migrated. The simple mortise and tenon construction and the casement method of operation (side-hung sash that swing outward on hinges) are typical of the period, although stationary sash were also popular. The small size of the Coddington sash (27 1/2" H. x 20 1/2" W. x 1" D.) is characteristic of 17th-century American windows and reflects the scarcity and high cost of window glass, as well as the need for protection against harsh North American winters.

Glazing consists of small, hand-blown panes, set into the sash with lead strips termed "comes" or "calmes," reinforced with thin wooden bars. Although a rectangular pane is used here, diamond-shaped glazing was also common. Despite attempts at window glass manufacture at Jamestown, VA, most early glazing had to be imported from

Europe. So difficult and costly was it to obtain that the colonists frequently urged friends back home to bring their own. In 1634, William Wood advised prospective immigrants

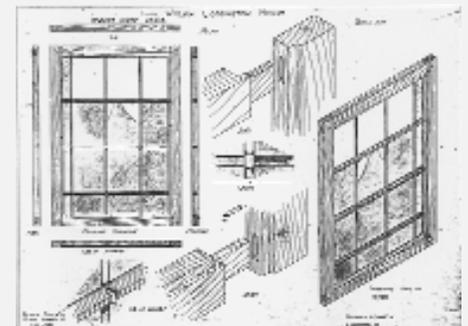


Fig. 1. Drawing made in 1929 of a c. 1641 wood casement window from the Governor William Coddington House, Newport, RI. The Rhode Island Historical Society's unsuccessful attempt to save the house from demolition in 1835 was one of the first concerted preservation efforts in the state. Both the sash and the drawing are now part of the study collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, RI. Drawing courtesy Rhode Island Historical Society.

(**Architectural Historian**—continued on page 20)